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Age editorial - SA Oligarchy

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EDITORIAL, 1968

THE AGE

Friday, March 8, 1968

SA oligarchy

OVER the years the rest of Australia became accustomed to the triennial disgrace of the South Australian electorate "confirming" in office a State Government that had no proper mandate to govern. This ugly ritual was abandoned in 1965, when Labor fluked its way into power, but now there is a likelihood that South Australia will revert to its briefly interrupted rule by oligarchy. Because of the State's gerrymandered electoral boundaries — probably the worst in any part of the world that is English-speaking, non-racist and at least nominally democratic — the Labor Government is in danger of being displaced by the party it trounced at the polls last Saturday.

Like most of Australia's Lower Houses, the South Australian House of Assembly is elected according to a system of multiple electorates (one to each member) and preferential voting. With this system there can be no guarantee that the party or coalition which returns the most parliamentarians will also have the biggest share of the overall vote. But it is generally recognised that any disproportion between a party's share of the vote and the number of its elected representatives should be marginal. In South Australia the disproportion is usually outrageous. For the past 24 years the Liberal-Country League has never had a bigger overall vote than Labor, yet it has been in power for all but three of those years. Labor could not form a Government even in 1962, when it had 55 per cent. of the vote, compared with the LCL's 35 per cent.

On Saturday, Labor won about 53 per

cent. of the vote, compared with the LCL's 43 per cent. No one with the slightest respect for democratic principle could deny Mr. Dunstan's right to continue as Premier, but the LCL, with the connivance of an Independent, may manage to wangle him back on to the Opposition benches. This is possible because, to the LCL, cows are more sacred than principle. It rigged electoral boundaries in favor of rural interests to the extent that one-third of the State's voters return two-thirds of the Assembly's members. Mr. Dunstan tried to reform the electoral map so that all votes had roughly the same value, but he was frustrated by the Legislative Council, which is elected on a restricted property franchise, is dominated by the LCL and is more powerful than the House of Lords. Of course, if the LCL regains control of the Assembly, the Council will gleefully approve any new gerrymander to keep Labor out of power for years and years and years...

Those of us who live outside South Australia can be grateful that we are not victims of this sort of political immorality. Or can we? The Governments in Canberra and Spring Street are both aided by a voting system that favors rural interests. Federal boundaries are to be redrawn before the 1969 elections, and the electoral commissioners have received from the Government a broad hint to produce another gerrymander. If the hint is taken, a vote in some rural electorates could be worth a third more than a vote in some city electorates. If they ignore the hint, the commissioners will uphold the principle that government should reflect the wishes of the majority.

Their master's voice